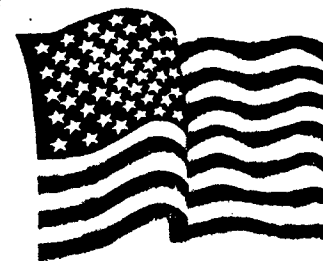


SAN
GABRIEL
VALLEY

MONDAY, AUGUST 25, 1997

TRIBUNE



25¢
PLUS TAX

Testing begins on Valley wells

Public agencies, private firms seek to pinpoint perchlorate contamination

By Laurence Darmiento
STAFF WRITER

Seeking to better define how much of the area's water has been contaminated by the rocket fuel additive perchlorate, several public agencies and private companies have decided to conduct tests on wells throughout the San Gabriel Valley.

The tests are being per-

formed on water drawn from up to 150 wells in active production, and are expected to be completed on dozens more drilled to monitor the extent of pollution by industrial solvents discovered nearly 20 years ago.

The testing was started several weeks ago by the Main San Gabriel Basin Watermaster, an umbrella agency that oversees the 167-square-mile basin. In

addition, federal environmental officials have ordered other testing by private companies following the June discovery of perchlorate in the Baldwin Park area.

"We need to know the extent of the perchlorate contamination for the sake of perchlorate, but also for the sake of cleaning up all the other chemicals in the basin," said Kevin Mayer, an

Environmental Protection Agency administrator. "Perchlorate could have a very significant impact on any clean-up action we will do."

A chlorine derivative added to rocket fuel, munitions and fireworks, perchlorate was detected in June at levels above state health standards south of Azusa after limited testing ordered by the state Depart-

ment of Health Services.

The discovery caused the La Puente Valley County Water District to shut all three of its wells, and three other water districts to either shut wells or blend the affected water with other sources to lower the concentration.

In larger doses perchlorate slows the absorption of iodine.

Please turn to TESTING / A6

TESTING

Samples needed to plan for cleanup

Continued from A1

causing enlargement of the thyroid gland, sluggishness and even depression; at very high levels it may be fatal. At the concentrations discovered locally, its effects are unknown, especially on pregnant women, their fetuses and infants.

The initial testing was ordered by state health officials after perchlorate was found seeping into drinking water supplies in eastern Sacramento County near an Aerojet plant that manufactures rocket engines.

Aerojet has a second facility in Azusa but has denied it is the source of the local perchlorate contamination, saying its site was used during the 1940s by a munitions manufacturer. It has been named by the EPA as among 19 companies potentially responsible for the industrial solvent contamination.

"Originally the tests had to do with rocket fuel, and how many factories in the basin use rocket fuel," said Carol Williams, executive officer of the Watermaster. "But we also have fireworks and munitions factories. And we also have to consider the fact there might be migration. Every time we go out and sample a well we are now doing perchlorate tests to see if there are any other problem areas throughout the basin."

Earlier this month, the agency budgeted \$300,000 to fund perchlorate testing, research and public education. The agency's members include all of the Valley's water purveyors, as well as its industrial

TESTING FOR PERCHLORATE

The Main San Gabriel Basin Watermaster, federal and state environmental officials and private companies have decided to test the 167-square-mile water basin to determine the extent of contamination by perchlorate.

■ **What's perchlorate:** An additive to rocket fuel, fireworks and explosives, the chemical inhibits the absorption of iodine by the thyroid gland and can lead to an enlarged thyroid. It also has been used to treat hyperactive thyroids. It may be fatal at very high doses. Its effect at low levels on infants, fetuses and pregnant women is unknown.

■ **What's at issue:** Tests conducted by the state Department of Health Services in May found the chemical at levels above health standards in wells in the Baldwin Park area. The discovery has complicated plans to clean up the basin, which also is polluted with industrial solvents. Cleanup plans are now on hold as tests are conducted on the extent of perchlorate contamination, its health effects and how it can best be removed from water.

pumpers.

Results are not yet available for most of the testing of the basin, which ranges from South Pasadena on the west to La Verne on the east, and from the San Gabriel Mountains on the north to Whittier Narrows on the south.

However, early results show the chemical has been found outside the Baldwin Park area in a single El Monte city well. But the level is within health standards, said Gary Yamamoto, chief of drinking water operations for the state Department of Health Services.

It also has been found at one well on the extreme western end of the basin in the Alhambra area. That contamination is believed to be spillover from the the adjacent Raymond water basin in Pasadena polluted by rocket testing conducted by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Yamamoto said.

Tests have yet to be conducted of monitoring wells drilled at basin Superfund sites in the Alhambra area, El Monte, South El Monte, La Puente and

Baldwin Park, the single largest contamination zone in the basin.

A steering committee of 11 companies in the Baldwin Park area is expecting to present its plans this week for testing of the monitoring wells, and even drilling several additional ones specifically for perchlorate.

"We are trying to move forward with it," said Huff Corp. attorney David Giannoffi, a committee spokesman. "We would like to do all the sampling at the same time to get a snapshot of the contamination."

The EPA has granted the companies — all but one of which has been judged potentially responsible by the agency for basin water pollution — a delay in the design and development of a treatment plant while perchlorate is studied.

The companies also plan to conduct studies on how best to treat perchlorate, an avenue of research the Watermaster is pursuing with the East Valley Water District in the Redlands area, where perchlorate also has been found in ground water.